

Reconciliation (Luke 15: 11b-32)
Craig Atwood, Home Moravian Church March 30, 2025

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Jesus said: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So, he divided his property between them.

“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But

we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

Introduction

Our gospel reading for this morning is one of the most famous and influential parables that Jesus told. There are people who have never attended church or read the Bible who know what you mean when you mention the return of a prodigal son or killing the fatted calf. I know people who love this parable, and some who are bothered by it. According to Luke, the people who heard this parable were upset by it because they knew Jesus was talking about them.

Exegetical notes

This parable is unusual in several ways. It is one of the longest parables Jesus told. Most of his parables are short and easy to remember, but this one has three characters and a lot of dialogue. In that way it is like another popular parable about the Good Samaritan. I suspect that the reason those parables are memorable is because they are vividly written. Another unusual thing about our lesson for today is that appears only in the Gospel of Luke. Some biblical scholars suspect that it was Luke, not Jesus, who wrote this story. I have no doubts that Jesus told a story like this even if Luke edited it for publication.

The gospel agree that Jesus often taught through parables. Parables are meaningful stories that help people understand difficult teachings. They are not reports about historical events. They are fictitious but still true to life. They aren't like fairy tales or fables with talking animals and magic. We can picture a woman searching for a lost coin or a man sewing or a prodigal child. Unlike Aesop's fables, parables do not have a simple moral at the end. The hearer must work out the meaning of the parable for themselves.

Luke includes the parable of the prodigal son as the third parable about people losing something and then rejoicing when they found it. Although we call this the parable of the Prodigal Son, it is really about the Father who rejoices when his lost son is found. In German Bibles, this parable is often titled the Waiting Father. I think we get different meanings from this story depending on who you think is the main character. Is it the waiting father or the younger son who squandered his inheritance? My mom once told me that it's a very different story if you look at from the perspective of the fat calf, but we won't go into that today. This morning, we are going to look at the parable as a story about the older brother.

Inheritance

There are a couple of things that many people, including some scholars, misunderstand because they read it from a modern American perspective. These days, most people make sure that each of their children will receive roughly equal portions

of the estate when they die. I'm sure that our lawyers in the congregation have many stories about children who felt cheated by their parents' will. But dividing property equally does not work in an agricultural society like ancient Israel. You don't want to divide up farmland generation after generation because that diminishes the estate. When a farm gets too small, it is almost worthless because there is not enough land for crops and animals. Typically, in agricultural societies the eldest son inherits the land, the house, and the animals on the land. Younger sons would receive some type of payment and a few possessions as their inheritance. Daughters would only receive a dowery for their marriage. This means that the younger son in the parable knew that as long as his brother was alive, he would not inherit his father's lands. The text says that the property was divided between the sons, but not that it was divided equally.

The story begins with the younger son growing impatient. He knows that he is going to have to leave one day unless he wanted to live on his brother's estate. We don't know how old he was or why he was impatient. Perhaps he didn't trust his older brother to give him what was his when the time came. Perhaps he was ambitious and wanted to make his fortune while he was still young. Or perhaps he was just young and foolish and eager to leave the farm and enjoy the city. He was not the first or last young person to feel that way.

I imagine that the first people to hear this parable gasped when the son asked for his inheritance early. This meant that the younger son was treating his father like he was dead. By asking for his inheritance, he was severing his relationship to his family. The father could have refused and tried to keep him home. He could have reassured him that his brother would do what was right when the time came. But instead he let him go. The father did one of the hardest things a parent can do – he let his adult child leave home and make mistakes. We don't know what the parting was like. Were there hugs and tears? Were there prayers and blessings? Was there anger and accusations? Was there a stony silence that no one could break without shattering their fragile relationships?

There is a detail in the story that is often overlooked by preachers: the father decided to give his older son his inheritance, too. He didn't need to do that, but he did. From that time on, the older son oversaw the estate. He made the big decisions. No doubt he treated his father with respect, but the truth is that the father was dependent on his son. As we see in the story, the servants still followed the father's instructions, but the son was really in charge.

When the prodigal son returned, the father could not restore his squandered inheritance. What was wasted was gone for good. The older brother did not lose any of his property when his brother returned. When the prodigal son came to his senses and went back home he was expecting to be treated as one of the slaves on the estate. At the end of the story the father reminds his older son he already has everything the

father owned. He would lose nothing by welcoming his brother home except for a fatted calf and clothing, but the older brother felt like he was losing something even more important than property. With these point in mind, let's hear the story again from the perspective of the older brother.

Retelling

There were once two brothers. The elder brother was conscientious and hard-working. He had always known that he would inherit most of his father's farm and wealth one day, and so he worked hard to make the estate prosperous. This brother worked and saved. He was diligent in his work and always paid his bills. He was also shrewd and never paid more than he had too. He denied himself many pleasures, including the pleasure of friendship. He was a good, obedient child who never gave his father any trouble, but he rarely gave his father much joy either. His father was proud of him, but they rarely talked about anything other than work. Let's just say that he was more like Bert than Ernie on Sesame Street.

The younger brother was different. He was a dreamer and a wanderer. He liked to stay up late and count the stars in the sky and he loved to listen to music and the tales of travelers. His father was sometimes disappointed and even hurt by his son's antics, but he loved him. Nothing pleased the father more than long conversations with this son who wanted to know what the world was like. Both of them knew that under the laws of inheritance, the younger son had little to look forward to. It did not really surprise the father when his son asked for his inheritance early, so he seek his fortune in the world.

It did not surprise the father, but it hurt him deeply. He knew that he might never see his child again. He was also pretty sure that this son could not handle this much money at one time. They argued, but finally with a heavy heart, the father let his youngest child leave. He went ahead and gave his other son his share of the inheritance as well. From that day, the wealthy patriarch who was a respected elder became an old man who depended on his son. Day after day, the father sat by gate looking down the road that led to the city hoping, hoping, hoping against hope that his boy would return. He didn't care if the boy came back successful and wealthy or poor and ragged. Love doesn't look at your clothing.

The elder brother had always resented his younger brother who he dismissed as lazy and insolent. The elder brother was secretly glad when the boy took his inheritance and left home for good. Now he could run the farm the right way. It would be efficient and profitable. There was no time for parties with friends.

And yet, the elder brother often lay awake at night thinking about his worthless sibling. He lay there imagining all the ways his young brother was wasting his money, money that could have been saved and invested. He pictured his brother doing all

sorts of things he would never do, things that he condemned, things that he wanted to do. But most of the time the elder brother wanted to prove to his father that he was the good son. He was the one who deserved his father's love. That was what he really wanted, to be the only one his father loved. He was the good one. The righteous one. The one who stayed and did all the work.

One day the older son was working in the fields, his fields. It was a hot day, but he didn't trust a hired hand to do this work. He was surprised when one of his slaves came running up to him with the news that his younger brother had returned. His worthless lazy wayward brother had come home. For a brief moment he thought that his father would send the boy away.

But then he heard that his father was throwing a celebration for the younger son. He ran to see if it was true, and there was his half-starved, sunburned brother wearing a robe. His bleeding feet were in new sandals. And there on his finger was a ring. The servants were preparing a feast and inviting the neighbors to celebrate.

How could this be? He had done all the work, he had been good, he had been there day after day with his father; he had never disobeyed or disrespected his father, but this wastrel, this scoundrel, was being honored. It was the look on his father's face that really pierced him through the heart. His father was happy, so happy he forgot that the calf and the wine belonged to him. He never had even a small party. All those years he had asked his father for nothing, and that is what he got.

He was angry. He felt cheated. He stood outside the celebration, looking at the revelers, but he refused to go in. There should have been punishment or penance or something, anything except a celebration. It wasn't fair! Where was his reward? The least his father could have done would be to use him as an example to shame his prodigal younger brother. His father could have said, this is my beloved, my son to him and only to him.

Shaking with rage and embarrassment, the older brother remained outside in the cold night, stubbornly refusing to enjoy the party or join the celebration. His father sought him out. He tried to change his mind, but it was no use. He told his son that he loved him and that he was always with him. All that I have is yours, he reminded him. But the good son stood alone with no comfort but his own righteousness. And the father whose heart had been full of joy walked away sadly. There was a man who had two sons, both of whom he loved, both of whom broke his heart.

Us

Many people have told me that they don't like this parable because they identify with the older brother more than the prodigal son. I can see that. I doubt there are many people here this morning who squandered their health and wealth in scandalous living and had to repent. In church, we sing hymns about love and forgiveness, but how do

we act when someone genuinely repents and tries change to change their life? Do we celebrate when they come back to church? Or do we look askance at them and criticize them. I suspect that many of us here today have sometimes gotten trapped like the Older Brother. We let our thirst for respect cut us off from the joy of living. Have we let relationships be destroyed because of our pride? But who is really hurt when we hold onto our anger and refuse to be reconciled to those who have wronged? The unforgiving heart becomes cold and hard, and its owner becomes isolated.

Conclusion

In our righteous indignation at others, it can be hard to hear what the Father told the older brother, what God says to each of us, "All that I have is yours. You are losing nothing that was promised. Your inheritance with the saints in light is safe. But come and celebrate with your brothers and sisters." In our quest to prove worthy of God's love we can miss the truth of the gospel. God already loves you - deeply, sincerely, passionately. We cannot earn his love because we already have it. Rather than standing alone in the cold warmed only by resentment, let us rejoice and celebrate God's grace.